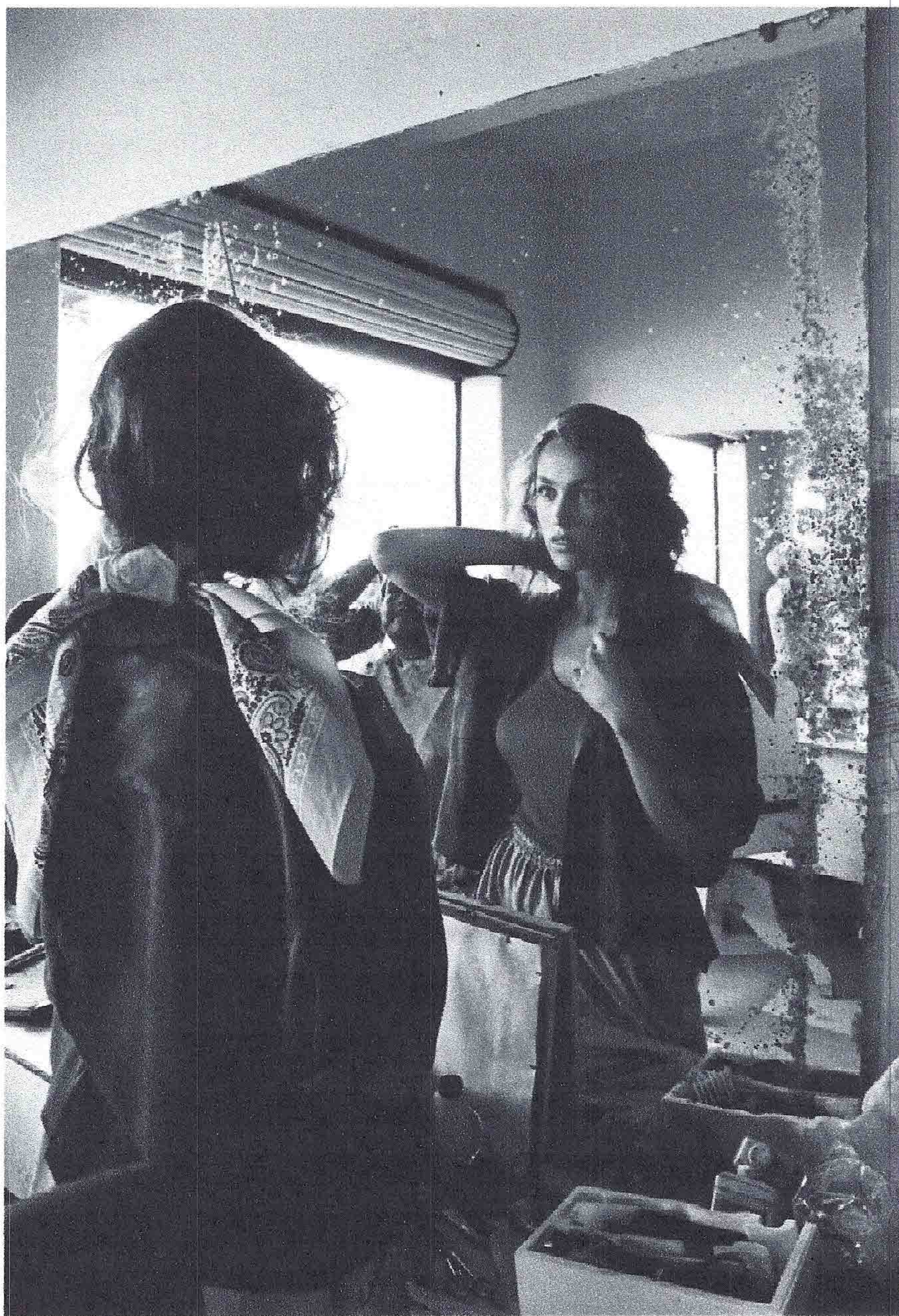

FICTION

VAST HELL

BY GUILLERMO MARTÍNEZ



A small town is a vast hell.
—*Argentinean proverb.*

Oftentimes, when the grocery store is empty and all you can hear is the buzzing of flies, I think of that young man whose name we never knew and whom no one in town ever mentioned again. For some reason that I can't explain, I always imagine him as we saw him that first time: the dusty clothes, the bristling beard, and especially the long, dishevelled hair that almost covered his eyes. It was the beginning of spring, which is why, when he came into the store, I took him for a camper headed south. He bought a few cans of food and some coffee; as I added up the bill, he looked at his reflection in the window, brushed his hair off his forehead, and asked me if there was a barber in town.

In those days, there were two barbers in Puente Viejo. Now I realize that if he'd gone to Old Melchor's he might never have met the French Woman, and no one would have gossiped about them. But Melchor's place was at the other end of town, and I had no reason to anticipate what happened.

The fact is that I sent him to Cerviño's place, and it seems that while Cerviño was giving him a haircut the French Woman appeared. And the French Woman looked at the boy the way she looked at all men. And that was when the bloody business started, because the boy stayed on in town and we all thought the same thing: that he'd stayed on because of her.

It hadn't been a year since Cerviño and his wife had settled in Puente Viejo, and we knew very little about them. They didn't socialize with anyone, as the whole town used to point out angrily. If the truth be told, in poor Cerviño's case it was little more than shyness, but the French Woman may, in fact, have been quite stuck up. They'd come from the big city the previous summer, at the beginning of the season, and when Cerviño opened his barbershop I remember thinking that he'd soon send Old Melchor under, because he had a hairdresser's diploma and had won a prize in a crewcutting competition, and he owned a pair of electric clippers, a hair dryer, and a swivel chair, and he would sprinkle vegetable extracts onto your scalp and even spray some lotion on you if you didn't stop him in time. Also, in

Cerviño's shop the latest sports magazine was always in the rack. And, above all, there was the French Woman. I never actually knew why people called her the French Woman, and I never tried to find out—I'd have been disappointed to discover that the French Woman was born, for instance, in Bahía Blanca, or, even worse, in a small town like this one. Whatever the truth, the fact is that I'd never met a woman quite like her. Maybe it was simply that she didn't wear a bra: even in winter you could see that she wasn't wearing a thing under her sweater. Or maybe it was her habit of appearing in the barbershop barely dressed and putting on her makeup in the mirror, right there in front of everyone. But that wasn't it. There was something even more disturbing about the French Woman than her body, which always seemed uneasy in its clothes, even more unsettling than the low plunge of her neckline. She would stare into your eyes steadily, until you had to look down, and her eyes were full of incitement, full of promise, but they also had a mocking glimmer, as if she were testing you, knowing in advance that you'd never take up her challenge, as if she had already made up her mind that no one in town measured up to her wild standards. So she'd provoke us with her eyes, and scornfully, also with her eyes, she'd draw away.

All this in front of Cerviño, who seemed to notice nothing, bent in silence over the backs of our necks, clicking his scissors in the air from time to time.

Oh, yes, the French Woman was at first Cerviño's best publicity, and in the early months his barbershop was very busy. But I had been mistaken about Melchor. The old man was no fool, and he gradually started to lure his clients back. He somehow managed to get some porno magazines, which the military had forbidden in those days, and later, during the World Cup, he gathered all his savings and bought a color TV, the first one in town. Then he started saying, to whoever would listen, that in Puente Viejo there was one and only one barbershop for men; Cerviño's was a hairdresser's for poofs.

However, my guess is that if many returned to Melchor's barbershop it was, once again, because of the French Woman; few men can stand being mocked or humiliated for very long by a woman.

As I was saying, the young man stayed on. He set up a tent on the outskirts of town, behind the dunes, not far from the house of Espinosa's widow. He rarely came to the grocery store; whenever he did, he'd shop for a long haul, for a fortnight or a month, but every single day he visited the barber's.

And, since it was hard to believe that he went there only to read the sports pages, people started to pity Cerviño. In the beginning, everyone felt sorry for him. The truth is that it wasn't difficult to feel sorry for Cerviño: he had the innocent air of a cherub and an easy smile, as shy people often do. He was a man of very few words, and at times he appeared to sink into a tortuous and distant world; his eyes would wander into space and he'd stand for a long while, sharpening his razor blade or interminably clicking his scissors, so that you had to cough to bring him back to reality. Once or twice, I surprised him in the mirror, staring at the French Woman with a mute, concentrated passion, as if he himself were unable to believe that such a woman was his wife. And that devoted gaze, which held not the shadow of a doubt, filled us with pity.

On the other hand, it was equally easy for us to condemn the French Woman, above all for the town's married women and for the spinsters in search of husbands, who, from the very start, had made common cause against her fearful necklines. But many men also felt resentful of the French Woman, especially those who had a reputation as the lady-killers of Puente Viejo, such as Nielsen the Jew—men who weren't accustomed to being slighted, much less scorned, by a woman.

And, either because the World Cup was over and there was nothing left to talk about or because there was a dearth of scandals in town, all conversations led eventually to the goings on of the French Woman and her young man. From behind the counter, I'd hear over and over the same comments: what Nielsen had seen one night on the beach (it had been a cold night and yet they had both stripped naked and they must have been on drugs, because they had done something that Nielsen would not describe, even with no women present); what Espinosa's widow had said (that from her window she could always hear laughter and moaning coming from the

boy's tent, the unmistakable sound of two bodies rolling around together); what the eldest of the Vidals had told us (that right in the barbershop, right there in front of him and of Cerviño . . .). Who knows how much of the gossip was true.

One day, we realized that the boy and the French Woman had disappeared. I mean, the boy didn't seem to be around anymore, and no one had seen the French Woman, either in the barbershop or on the pathway down by the beach where she liked to go for walks. The first thing we all thought was that they'd run away together, and, maybe because running away always has a romantic ring to it, or because the dangerous temptress was now out of reach, the women seemed willing to forgive the French Woman for this. It was obvious that there was something wrong in that marriage, they'd say. Cerviño was too old for her, and also the boy was very handsome. . . . And with secretive giggles they'd confess that maybe they would have done the same.

One afternoon, when the matter was being discussed yet again, Espinosa's widow, who happened to be in the grocery store, said in a mysterious voice that in her opinion something far worse had taken place; the boy, as we all knew, had set up his tent near her house, and even though she, like the rest of us, hadn't seen him for days the tent was still there and it seemed to her very strange—she repeated the words “very strange”—that they would not have taken the tent with them. Someone said that maybe the police should be told, and then the widow muttered that it might also be fitting to keep an eye on Cerviño. I remember becoming angry and yet not knowing how to respond: my rule is never to enter into an argument with a customer. I began by weakly saying that no one should be accused without proof, and that in my opinion it was impossible that Cerviño, that someone like Cerviño . . . But the widow cut in: it was a well-known fact that shy people, introverted people, can be extremely dangerous when pushed too far.

We were still going around in circles when Cerviño appeared at the door.

There was a deep silence; he must have realized that we were talking about him,

A MODERN GREEK FOLK SONG

Back in front of St. Dimitriou, start of winter,
the boy passes by with his oxen, heading for the fields.
And the girl who loves him takes him fresh bread.
On the crest of the hill she sits down and says to her George,
“Come, sweetheart, eat some bread, eat your fill.”
The boy falls to kissing, the girl to playing her games.
The oxen tire themselves out, joined the day long.
Blackeye turns toward Sweetface and finally says,
“Isn't the boss anywhere at all to get us unyoked?”

—Anonymous

(Translated, from the Greek, by Edmund Keeley.)

because everyone looked down or away. I saw him blush, and, more than ever, he seemed to me like a helpless child who had never tried to grow up. When he gave me his order, I noticed that he had only a few groceries on his list and that he hadn't asked for yogurt. While he was paying, the widow abruptly asked him about the French Woman. Cerviño blushed once more, but gently now, as if he felt honored by so much solicitude. He said that his wife had travelled up to the city to look after her father, who was very sick, but that she would be back soon, maybe in a week's time. While he was speaking, a curious expression, which at first I found hard to parse, crept over the faces around me: disappointment. And as soon as Cerviño was gone the widow renewed her attack. She, the widow said, had not been taken in by that humbug; we'd never see the poor woman again. And in a low voice she insisted that there was a murderer on the loose in Puente Viejo, and that any one of us could be the next victim.

A week went by, then a whole month, and the French Woman hadn't returned. Nor had the boy been seen again. The kids from town started using his tent to play at cowboys and Indians, and Puente Viejo divided itself into two camps: those who were convinced that Cerviño was a criminal and those of us who believed that the French Woman would come back—and we were becoming fewer and fewer. One could hear people say that Cerviño had slit the boy's throat with a razor while cutting his hair, and mothers would forbid their children to play in the street outside the barbershop and beg their husbands to go back to Melchor's. However, and this may

seem strange, Cerviño wasn't bereft of clients: the boys in town would dare one another to go and sit in the doomed barber's chair and ask for a razor haircut, and it became a sign of virility to wear one's hair brushed upward and sprayed.

When we asked for news of the French Woman, Cerviño would repeat the story about his sick father-in-law, which no longer sounded believable. People stopped greeting him, and we heard that Espinosa's widow had told the police inspector that Cerviño should be arrested. But the inspector had answered that, until the bodies were found, nothing could be done.

The town started making conjectures about the bodies: some said that Cerviño had buried them under his patio; others that he'd cut them into strips and thrown them into the sea. And gradually, in the townspeople's imagination, Cerviño grew into an increasingly monstrous being.

In the grocery store, listening to the same talk over and over, I began to feel a superstitious fear, the presentiment that in these endless discussions something awful was being hatched. In the meantime, Espinosa's widow seemed to have gone out of her mind. She went about digging holes everywhere, armed with a ridiculous child's shovel, hollering at the top of her voice that she wouldn't rest until she'd found the bodies.

And one day she found them.

It was an afternoon at the beginning of November. The widow came into the store and asked me if I had any shovels, and then, in a loud voice so that everyone would hear, she said that the

inspector had sent her in search of shovels and volunteers to dig in the dunes behind the bridge. Next, slowly dropping the words one by one, she said that it was there that she had seen, with her very own eyes, a dog devouring a human hand. A shiver ran down my back; suddenly it had all become true, and while I was looking for the shovels, and while I locked up the store, I kept on hearing, without quite believing it yet, the horrific conversation: "dog," "body," "human hand."

Proudly, the widow led the march. I trailed behind, carrying the shovels. I looked at the others and saw the usual faces, the people who came to the store to buy pasta and tea. I looked around me and nothing had changed, no sudden gust of wind, no unexpected silence. It was an afternoon like all others, at that useless hour when one wakes up from one's nap. Below us, the houses stood in an ever-decreasing line, and the sea itself, in the distance, seemed provincial, unthreatening. For an instant, I thought that I understood my own feelings of incredulity. Because something like this couldn't be happening here, not in Puente Viejo.

When we reached the dunes, the inspector hadn't found anything yet. He was digging bare-chested, and his shovel rose and fell unhampered. He gestured vaguely around him, and I handed out the shovels and sank mine into the spot that looked safest. For a while, the only sound was the dry thud of metal hitting sand. I was starting to lose my fear of the shovel and to think that maybe the widow had made a mistake, that maybe what she had told us wasn't true, when we heard a furious barking. It was the dog that the widow had seen earlier, a poor anemic creature running desperately around us in circles. The inspector tried to shoo it away by throwing bricks at it, but the dog came back again and again, and at a certain point seemed almost to jump up at the inspector's throat.

And then we realized that this was indeed the place. The inspector started to dig once again, faster and faster; his frenzy was contagious, the shovels moved in unison, and suddenly the inspector shouted that he'd hit something. He dug a little deeper and the first body appeared.

The others barely glanced at it and went back to their shovels, almost en-

thusiastically, searching for the French Woman, but I went up to the body and forced myself to look at it closely. Between its sand-filled eyes was a black hole. It wasn't the boy.

I turned around, to warn the inspector, and it was like stepping into a nightmare: everyone was digging up bodies. It was as if the bodies were sprouting from the earth. Every time a shovel dug in, a head would roll out or a mutilated torso would appear. Wherever you looked, there were dead bodies and more dead bodies, and heads and more heads.

The horror made me wander from one place to another; I wasn't able to think, I wasn't able to understand, until I saw a back riddled with bullets and, farther away, a blindfolded head. Then I realized what it was. I looked at the inspector and saw that he, too, had understood, and he ordered us to stay where we were, not to move, and went back into town to get instructions.

Of the time that went by until he came back, I remember only the incessant barking of the dog, the smell of death, and the figure of the widow prodding with her child's shovel among the corpses, shouting at us to carry on, because the French Woman had not yet been found. When the inspector returned, he was straight-backed and solemn, like someone ready to give orders.

He stood in front of us and told us to bury the bodies again, just as we had found them. We all went back to our shovels, no one daring to say a word.

As the sand covered the bodies, I asked myself whether the boy might not be here, too. The dog was barking and jumping up and down, as if crazy. Then we saw the inspector, one knee on the ground and his gun in his hand. He fired a single shot. The dog fell down dead. Then he took two steps, still holding the gun, and kicked the dog's body away, for us to bury it as well. Before heading back to town, he ordered us not to speak to anyone about what we had seen, and jotted down, one by one, the names of all who had been there.

The French Woman returned a few days later: her father had completely recovered. We never mentioned the boy again. The tent was stolen as soon as the holiday season started. ♦

*(Translated, from the Spanish,
by Alberto Manguel.)*

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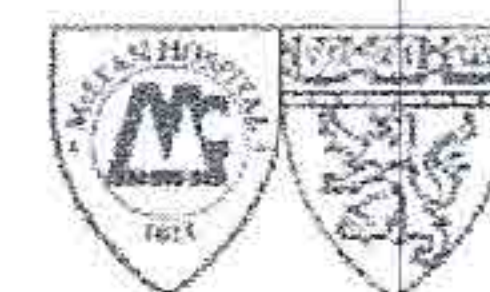
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